



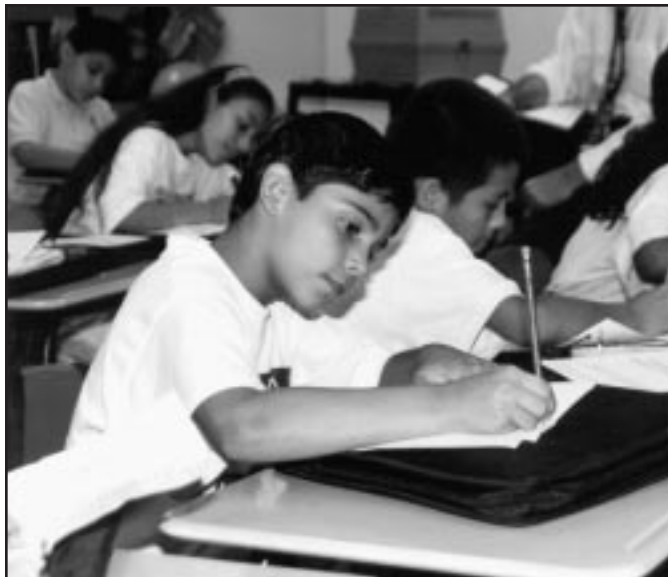
# At-Risk Students Steer Past Obstacles, Accelerate Toward Achievement at Unique Charter School

BY CRAIG HENDERSON

**M**any of their parents never made it past middle school. Many of their neighbors will never make it past the inner-city land mines of drugs, gangs, and violence. For kids in Houston's poorest neighborhoods, it seems college would be the farthest thing from their minds. Instead, it's foremost in their thoughts.

"I want to go to Harvard and become a lawyer," says Jackie Guzman, a ninth-grader at KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academy. Her sister, Karina, an eighth-grader, has her sights set on the University of Michigan and a career as an architect. "I want to build big houses," she says.

The sisters and nearly 300 other "at-risk" youths are heralded as "Houston's Hardest Working Students" by a banner at the KIPP Academy entrance. It's hard to argue with the claim. The fifth-grade through ninth-grade students, nearly all of whom are Hispanic or African-American, spend about 67 percent more time in class than any other middle schoolers in the country. KIPP Academy is their life from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday. Many students devote an additional two hours to an SAT



*Fifth-grader Rafael Chavez and his KIPP Academy classmates put pencils to paper.*

(Scholastic Assessment Test) preparation class on Saturday afternoons. The school year runs from September to July. Teachers assign about two hours of homework each day.

"Our life is school," says eighth-grader Bianca Medina, "but we love this place. There's nobody in this area doing what we're doing."

The reason for the academically rigorous schedule is simple: There's no time to waste if the aspir-

ing collegians are to realize their dreams. According to KIPP co-founder, director, and teacher Michael Feinberg, "We're in the fourth quarter with two minutes to go."

KIPP Academy, a wildly successful charter school that takes a college preparatory approach to public school education, is actually an outgrowth of frustration. Feinberg and David Levin, Ivy League graduates completing two-year Teach for America commitments as elementary school teachers in 1992 and 1993, saw first-hand evidence of the problems facing Houston's inner-city school children and public school systems in general. They witnessed promising elementary students—energized to learn and achieve in fifth grade—gradually losing interest in education during middle school,

frequently skipping classes, and often succumbing to the negative influences of urban life.

Feinberg and Levin knew the statistics. They knew only half of their former students would graduate from high school, and less than 20 percent of them would apply to college.

“Somewhere between elementary school and the end of high school, we are losing just about everybody,” Feinberg says. “Dave and I saw that and felt that personally once we established relations with these great kids and realized they were heading down a dark, dismal road. KIPP was our frantic response to do something to change the direction that road was going to take them.”

#### NO LIMITS

Begun at Macario Garcia Elementary School, the Knowledge Is Power Program became a public school in 1995 when Houston Independent School District officials voted to provide salaries and facilities for the new academy that initially worked proactively with fifth graders only. KIPP Academy has added a grade level each year and has grown from 71 students living in the city’s Gulfton community in 1995–96 to an estimated 300 students from across the city this fall. Its recent designation as a state charter school—along with local sister high school, Project Y.E.S.—means that funding will now be provided by the Texas Board of Education. The arrange-

ment allows KIPP Academy to operate free of many public school mandates and act more autonomously than other public schools.

Children are not selected to attend the cutting-edge academy that already has posted achievement test scores that rival those of private schools in affluent areas. Instead, they, with their parents’ approval, choose to attend KIPP Academy rather than remain at their zoned public schools. KIPP teachers often visit fourth-grade classrooms and canvass neighborhoods to identify children interested in attending the academy, but parents from the local area serve as the school’s best recruiters since they learn by word of mouth which children are potential “KIPPsters.”

With the possible exception of space limitations, no factors eliminate children as candidates. As Feinberg explains, “With our incoming fifth-grade class we don’t look at their grades or their test scores, and we don’t talk to teachers about past conduct and past performance in the classroom.”

“You don’t have to be a smart person to come here,” says Medina. “It’s your choice to be here. [Teachers] just want you to do your best. ... They expect you to do your best.”

#### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Medina’s observations are right on the mark. Expectations are a key ingredient in the KIPP recipe for success. But unlike traditional public school settings, in which, according to Feinberg, expectations for academic, behavioral, and intellectual objectives are set high but compromised at a lower level, KIPP Academy takes a different tack. It is guided by its motto, borrowed from 1992 Disney Teacher of the Year and KIPP board member Rafe Esquith: “There are no shortcuts.”

“It’s easy to create high expectations, but it’s very difficult to maintain them, especially when you see the disparity between where the kids are coming in compared to your expectations,” relates Feinberg. “At KIPP, because we believe there are no shortcuts, the key is doing whatever is necessary to find ways to make kids rise

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to that high level. In fifth grade we start by simply communicating what those expectations are.”

Prior to a student’s enrollment, expectations are spelled out in a contract called the KIPP Commitment to Excellence. The form explicitly states what is expected of teachers, parents/guardians, and students. The signature of each party is required for admission to the school.

One component of a parent’s commitment, for example, is to “check our child’s homework every night, let him/her call the teacher if there is a problem with the homework, and try to read with him/her every night.” Students must “always work, think, and behave in the best way I know how” and “do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn,” among other things. Failure to live up to the KIPP commitment can lead to expulsion for students and dismissal for teachers.

“These commitments are pretty extreme,” acknowledges Feinberg, stressing the school’s long-term goal of getting kids to college. “In a sense, we expect these families to make education their No. 1 priority for the next eight years.”

Laurie Bieber, a teacher who serves as KIPP Academy’s director of development, says kids entering fifth grade realize right away that they are in a completely different environment. They are given homework on day one, expected to call teachers at home with any questions, and taught that excuses are unacceptable when it comes to completing assignments. Their first year involves adopting the philosophy that there are no short-cuts to success and happiness in life; as Bieber puts it, they are “KIPPnotized.”

“Our expectations are high, and we’ve found that these kids will rise to any expectation you set,” Bieber



*Michael Feinberg grabs the attention of his fifth-grade math students with engaging educational exercises that require their participation.*

says. “We don’t give them busywork. We want everything we teach to be relevant to their inner-city lives and their goal of going to college.”

### CATCHING UP TO THE PACK

KIPP Academy depends on the extra classroom time provided by its extended-day/extended-year strategy to bring its fifth-grade students up to an academic level on par with students in other public schools. Since many new students are “below grade level” when they enter KIPP’s fifth-grade classes, it is the only logical way to close the gap.

“The extra time allows us to get them caught up without sacrificing their complete education,” Feinberg says. “In order to get their math and reading caught up, we’re not sacrificing science, history, and music. We’re still able to offer them a well-rounded education.”

Because most 10-year-old kids don’t have a natural desire to spend 10 hours a day in a classroom to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, Feinberg says it is important for them to “acquire the taste” for learning. There must be some motivating factor to make them want to go through the intense KIPP process.

“It is my job to get the kids to buy into the mission, buy into the learning process, and help them learn how to learn—to make them appreciate it,” he says.

A high-energy fifth-grade teacher who engages his students with chants, shouts, and rhythmic beats to aid memorization of multiplication tables and state capitals, Feinberg describes himself as a “set-up man” for KIPP’s other 20 teachers.

“Those chants are nice and all, and they’re fun, but I certainly don’t have chants that are going to get these kids to college,” Feinberg says. “The chants are intended to help the kids focus on some of the basic skills, which they can use as a springboard to work with other teachers at the higher grade levels in more traditional academic settings.”

By the time KIPP students reach Julene Mohr’s seventh-grade class, they have mastered the skills necessary to progress at an accelerated pace. Only two years after “raping” their multiplication tables in Feinberg’s class, the

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## **“We’re really going back to the basics.”**

**LAURIE BIEBER,  
DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT**

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students are solving quadratic equations and completing assignments from a ninth-grade algebra book in Mohr’s class.

“In fifth and sixth grade, we’re able to get them ahead of where they’re supposed to be compared to other public schools in the area and more on track compared to private schools,” explains Mohr, one of several KIPP teachers recruited from Teach for America, a fast-track teacher certification program that places promising college graduates in inner-city and rural classrooms for two-year stints. KIPP also recruits master teachers from the local community and traditional four-year programs.

Teachers maintain high expectations, a consistent message, and a shared language from one grade to the next, according to Mohr. She says the students discover how to succeed in any academic setting, even in the face of widely varying teaching styles.

“They bring the tools and they follow the rules, so it doesn’t matter who their teacher is or how good or bad the textbook is,” Mohr says. “They are determined to focus on doing whatever is necessary to get the information and knowledge they need.”

As students progress through the KIPP system, expectations are augmented and responsibilities increased. Seventh-graders read about a dozen English-language novels during the year while enhancing their bilingual skills with high school-level Spanish language and literature classes. This year, the school’s eighth-grade curriculum will be taught at a high school level, allowing students to earn high school credit for certain classes so they will proceed to an honors and/or advanced placement track.

After only two years in the KIPP Academy program, students are no longer scrambling to catch up with their counterparts in other schools; they are striding past them. During the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, academy teachers estimate that students at the school are accelerated nearly two years beyond their peers in other schools throughout the local district.

KIPP Academy, now beginning its fourth year, has consistently proved that its college preparatory approach to public education can produce impressive results. Of the students initially enrolled at the school, only 57 percent passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reading tests as fourth-graders. After their first year at KIPP Academy, 98 percent passed. Now, with nearly all of its students easily passing all phases of the state test—reading, math, writing, science, and social studies—KIPP Academy has been recognized as a Texas Education Agency Exemplary School for three years running.

Another assessment tool, the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement, also validates KIPP Academy’s methods. Administered to this year’s eighth-graders as they entered fifth, sixth, and seventh grades, the tests have identified marked improvement in a variety of academic areas each year and provided evidence of the accelerated nature of the program (Figure 1).



## The Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement

	Letter-word Identification	Passage Comprehension	Calculation	Applied Problems	Dictation	Writing Samples	Mean of All Tests
Entering 5th	5.88	4.78	5.32	5.41	3.68	4.09	4.86
Entering 6th	7.46	7.03	7.30	8.07	4.87	5.61	6.72
<b>1-Year Difference</b>	<b>+1.58</b>	<b>+2.25</b>	<b>+1.98</b>	<b>+2.66</b>	<b>+1.19</b>	<b>+1.52</b>	<b>+1.86</b>
Entering 7th	8.45	8.44	11.35	11.21	6.01	6.33	8.63
<b>1-Year Difference</b>	<b>+0.99</b>	<b>+1.41</b>	<b>+4.05</b>	<b>+3.14</b>	<b>+1.14</b>	<b>+0.72</b>	<b>+1.89</b>

Figure 1: Numbers represent average national grade levels.

“If you think about it, we’re really going back to the basics,” Bieber says. “We’re just spending more time on task. It makes sense—working harder.”

### COLLEGE, COLLEGE, COLLEGE

The assessment results are encouraging, but they cannot determine whether KIPP Academy has achieved its ultimate goal. Only time will determine that.

“We’ll be gratified starting in 2002 when our kids are getting their diplomas and going to college,” Feinberg says. That’s when we’ll know we’ve done our jobs fully.”

Not a day goes by that KIPP Academy students don’t hear about college in more than one class from more than one teacher. It’s part of the KIPP mission—to instill in them the belief that they “must and will attend college.” For children from more affluent neighborhoods, such a message is commonplace, usually coming from parents who attended college themselves. But for minority students from neighborhoods where few parents reached that level, there is no steady drumbeat to remind them of the long-range goal.

“It’s not about high school,” Mohr says. “It’s about college, college, college. The more you hear something the more it becomes ingrained. They hear the mission, and it becomes a part of who they are.”

Starting in seventh grade, KIPP Academy students begin taking a voluntary SAT preparation course, researching colleges, and determining what they must accomplish in terms of grades, extracurricular activities,

assessment scores, and recommendations to gain entry into their colleges of choice. During annual field trips to places such as New York City and Boston, KIPP students have paid visits to M.I.T., Columbia, Harvard, and many other universities. It’s all part of KIPP’s belief that, when it comes to college, it’s never too early to prepare.

“People think it’s early, but we’d like to expand KIPP downward and start talking about college with 4- and 5-year-olds in kindergarten,” Bieber says. “It’s never too early.”

### BIG CARROT vs. BIG STICK

Because KIPP Academy students are a reflection of the communities in which they live, safety valves must be in place to help them escape the problems that plague their neighborhoods: drug abuse, broken homes, teenage pregnancy, gangs, and juvenile crime. According to Feinberg, there are two reasons KIPP Academy students are far less likely to make the life-altering mistakes of so many of their peers. One involves the provision of alternatives. Through the school, kids are made to feel as though they’re accepted as part of a social group, which helps fulfill the social needs that all too frequently are met through misguided channels. The second reason involves a reward and punishment system Feinberg refers to as the big carrot vs. the big stick.

“On the big carrot side, kids know that if they don’t give in to those influences, their correct decision will be rewarded,” Feinberg says. “And on the big stick side, I

think most of our kids really care how their teachers would react if we found out they were in gangs or doing drugs or anything like that.”

Feinberg says the system, which focuses on consequences, works because students who behave properly are, in a sense, doubly rewarded, while their misbehaving and underachieving classmates are doubly punished.

“If someone in our school gets punished, there are two bad things that happen,” Feinberg explains. “They get the punishment, and they don’t get the reward, whereas the kids who do the right thing have two good things happen: They get the reward, and they don’t get the punishment.”

For instance, students who live up to their KIPP commitments enjoy recreational/educational trips to various points of interest locally, the freedom to socialize with friends during the school day, and academic field trips to far-away sites such as Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; Chicago; and national parks in southern Utah. Students who fail to fulfill their commitments miss out on all that and are relegated to the school’s dreaded “porch”—more a consequence than a physical place.

Students on the porch must attend class, but they cannot speak to anyone in the classrooms other than teachers, cannot socialize with friends at lunch time, cannot attend any field trip or special event, and must routinely write letters to fellow students apologizing for their actions and promising to modify their behavior the following week. As the signs on the school’s walls say: “If you can’t run with the big dogs, stay on the porch.”

“We believe very strongly that the team always beats individual and that we’re all running together,” Feinberg says. “If someone goes to the porch, it’s because they are not doing the work that the rest of the team is doing. By not pulling their weight, the burden falls on everyone else and makes a tough climb even tougher.”

Feinberg stresses the importance of balance in helping students generalize proper behaviors because, he says, “focusing only on negative consequences creates a rather dismal environment and focusing only on positive

consequences is certainly not preparing [students] for life.” As for educating kids about how to make proper choices—a vital skill in urban America—teachers at KIPP Academy play a key role.

“Until they acquire their own voice inside their conscience to tell them what’s right and wrong, using us as symbols or as a yardstick to measure ‘Now what would my teachers think?’ before they do something is fine,” Feinberg says. “Eventually, they’re going to replace the vision of us with the vision of themselves.”

According to KIPP Academy students, the level of discipline and the modeling of behavior at the school set it apart from other schools they’ve attended.

“I went to another [middle] school before, and there were fights all the time,” says ninth-grader Guzman. “There are never fights here ... never. Plus, you do kind of feel safer here. At my old school there were knives and other weapons.”

Ninth-grader Andres Garcia, who plans to attend Columbia University in a few years, says KIPP Academy stands in stark contrast to the last middle school he attended: “The main difference is there are no gangs here.”

## JOINT SUCCESS

KIPP Academy’s success stems from the combined dedication of everyone involved—students, teachers, and parents. The three-way commitment makes it all possible.

In addition to the long hours in the classroom, teachers often spend a large part of their evenings at home fielding questions from students, who are given teachers’ telephone, cellular, and pager numbers. Students are expected to call with homework problems or in case of emergency. The school also maintains a toll-free “1-800” number so students whose families have no telephone will not have to pay for a call.

“By working to rectify some of their problems on the phone, we are able to identify areas where the kids need help,” Mohr says. “It helps in the classroom in terms of closing some of the gaps.”

Because the school day is so long and because it essentially extends through the evening, teachers rarely get a break from KIPP Academy. But, as far as Mohr can tell, it's all worth it.

"The benefits far outweigh any sacrifice," she says. "Every day that I walk in that classroom, it's a much more meaningful experience for me personally. I almost feel selfish, like I'm getting more out of it than the kids are, so there is a payoff. You're putting a lot more hours in, but the rewards are very substantial."

Bieber says part of the school's appeal is that teachers are carrying out the more-than-full-time mission together.

"What's wonderful is you're not doing it in isolation," Bieber says. "Obviously there are a lot of teachers from different schools that come in early and stay late, but not the entire staff. It's nice to do it together."

KIPP Academy teachers also bridge the gap between school and community by providing rides to and from school for students whose families have no means of transportation and by visiting each student's home prior to and during the academic year. The teachers establish relationships with parents, advising them of their critical roles in the education process and the importance of taking an interest in school programs. The efforts have paid off.

For family nights and quarterly report card conferences, KIPP Academy usually enjoys nearly 100 percent parental attendance—an amazing feat by any standard. Parents are continually updated on their children's progress via weekly reports in the form of "paychecks," slips of paper on which teachers record comments during the week and assign a monetary value based on an assessment of each student's progress (\$20 is earned for a perfect week, \$0 for a terrible week). Students can use the "somewhat inflated" KIPP dollars to purchase clothing or other items at the discretion of parents. For instance, 100 KIPP dollars could purchase a compact disc at the music store. The checks—another incentive, or carrot, for students to work hard—are backed by money collected through the school's fund-raising efforts.

Parents review and "endorse" the progress paychecks each week and frequently discuss matters of concern with teachers over the phone.

"If you have the components in place and ensure that the overall KIPP mission is spread to the parents, students, and teachers—and those people are buying into it—then the system is a success," Mohr says. "When you bring all that together, there's a lot more trust and a lot more sharing involved. Without those relationships and three-way commitment, I don't think you can have a successful program."

### NO LETTING UP

Because the KIPP Academy model has proved itself as an innovative approach to education that yields eye-popping results, there has been talk of replicating it in other places. KIPP co-founder Levin has already successfully incorporated the model in a KIPP school now in its third year in the South Bronx, New York, and a KIPP expansion strategy in Texas is currently being discussed.

In the meantime, school officials at Houston's KIPP Academy have no plans of relaxing. They can't.

To provide students with the complete KIPP package, they must raise funds to the tune of \$800 per pupil to supplement the state funding that goes toward teacher salaries and facilities. The contributions from corporations, foundations, and individuals are necessary for the school to provide:

- *school supplies for individual students;*
- *a Saturday lunch for kids qualifying for the free breakfast/lunch program (nearly the entire student population);*
- *snacks to sustain students in the extended-day environment; and*
- *the reward program that comprises local field lessons each month and the end-of-year, out-of-state field trips.*

"That [\$800 per pupil per year] amount is the amount that is usually paid out of pocket by middle- and upper-class families for those kinds of things," Feinberg says. "We've taken on the responsibility as a

school to provide that to the families who are willing to put in the work but don't have the necessary financial means."

The supplemental funds are not used for teacher bonuses or salaries. They are used to directly impact students. The school has reached its financial goals every year so far, including the raising of \$220,000 last year.

Bieber, whose primary job as director of development is fund raising, says writing proposals and making presentations to potential contributors is not nearly as effective as having those individuals visit the school to see for themselves what KIPP Academy is all about. She says inner-city kids on a collective, unwavering mission to reach college are a sight to behold.


"You have to see what these kids are doing—the hours, the intensity, the fact that they're focused and on task, that it's for real," Bieber says. "Once they see the fire in the eyes of our students, that's our best selling point." ●

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about KIPP Academy, contact **Michael Feinberg**, director, or **Laurie Bieber**, director of development, at **713-988-5477**.

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